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Read an excerpt from **Chapter One**

Kiernan Fyn heard the high-pitched whine of a ship and could tell it was in trouble, even without the dark smoke trail spewing from the tail. It was coming in too fast and too steep.

The pilot must be dead—before the thought finished, the ship started a series of brutally sharp turns. Okay, not dead...yet.

Fyn strained with him through each turn, remembering how those turns felt, remembering trying not to crash.

And crashing anyway.

The pilot still hadn't slowed enough, and if he didn't turn soon, he'd go straight into the water. Kikk had a lot of water. Not a lot of ground. Only one place that was flat enough to attempt a landing.

The nose of the ship edged up a bit, but still not enough...it made a sudden turn toward him. Okay, he'd seen the beach. Now he just had to make it...

It dropped below the tree line, and after a bit, Fyn felt the impact ripple through the ground under his feet. The ship popped briefly into view again, then dropped out of sight. Another impact tremor. Longer this time, then...nothing.

No explosion. That was good. There'd be something to salvage.

He broke clear of the thick jungle and saw a deep hole in the sand. A break, then a furrow stretching down the beach so far he couldn't see the end.

He hesitated, searching the blue-green sky for any pursuit, but it was empty of everything but the drifting remains of the ship's smoke trail. He jumped down on to the white sand and walked along the furrow. Soon he could see the downed ship, the front crunched up against a tree.

He approached cautiously, doing a complete circuit, looking for signs of a secondary explosion, but it just hissed a bit, then subsided into a resigned silence.

It wasn't like any ship he'd seen, though he liked the look of it. It was long and sleek and dark.

He traced an odd drawing on the side, under some unfamiliar symbols. A small square of dark sky and stars, and a larger section of dark and light stripes.

The damage from contact with the tree wasn't too bad, but—he walked to the rear—weapons fire was. He bent close and sniffed. Dusan energy blast. There was another scorch mark on the side. That it had landed almost intact told him it was a tough, little ship—and a decent pilot.

He looked at the cockpit and saw a figure slumped over the controls. Fyn climbed up on the wing, studying the mechanism that kept the cover in place. After a few tries, it retracted with a loud, almost angry hiss.

The pilot's gear was as dark as his ship, his face hidden by a sturdy looking head covering. He also wore a heavy, dark flight suit, with the same symbols from the ship imbedded in the material.

Some flexible tubing stretched from his face mask to the ship. Probably his air supply. Fyn felt along the side of the mask and managed to unhook it.

Now he could see a gap between the suit and the head gear. He worked his fingers in until he felt skin and was surprised to feel blood pumping beneath the still warm surface. He found the strap, undid it and lifted the head gear off. The pilot's head fell back against the seat.

A woman?

He'd never seen a woman fly a ship and he'd been all over the galaxy. Her hair was red, it was so many shades of red, it flashed in the sunlight, catching the rays in the strands and reflecting them back as fire. He touched it, almost afraid it would burn, but it was as soft as the skin it lay against. Matching lashes lay in neat half moons against pale cheeks.

She moaned and shifted, turning her head and he saw a nasty gash on the side of her face, near the hairline. Blood dripped sluggishly down the side of her face.

A harness held her strapped in the seat. He explored the clasp for a few minutes and finally it popped apart. He felt along her arms and legs, then checked her ribs for damage, before easing her free of the craft and laying her in the sand.

She was tall, but surprisingly light. Her suit made her look more bulky than she was.

Inside her ship, he found bandages in a box with a red cross on the outside. She stirred again, when he cleaned her wound, but she didn't wake. Once he'd contained the bleeding and applied a covering, he went back and searched the cockpit again. He found a bag of what he assumed were emergency supplies and a couple of weapons.

He would have liked to study it all in more detail, but the light was fading. He needed to get them both under cover before dark.

He carried her and her stuff back to his cave, lowering her onto his bed, a pile of leaves and vines culled from the surrounding jungle. He pulled off her heavy gloves, exposing hands that were narrow with long, well formed fingers. Her dark suit seemed constrictive, but was secured with an odd metal track that pulled down to below her waist. Under her flight suit, she wore clothing that was unlike anything he'd ever seen. It was mottled in the shades of the earth and clouds. This clothing had many pockets, filled with more stuff. No wonder she looked so bulky. He emptied the pockets, studying each item, before adding it to a pile. She also had a knife in a holder and what looked like a holder for the smaller of the weapons he took out of the cockpit.

Two of her weapons were curious. They seemed to operate on a projectile penetration basis, unlike his energy based ones. He tucked all three behind a boulder. No reason to arm her until he found out how she felt about him.

He settled down by her, watching her and waiting for her eyes to open, wondering what color they'd be.

It was hard not to feel like the gods had sent him a gift for not giving up, but he realized she might not see her arrival in quite the same light. He ran a finger down the smooth curve of her cheek, then across her soft, full lower lip, relieved to see the slow rise and fall of her chest.

As light faded, worry replaced curiosity. Perhaps she had some injury beyond his ability to detect.

He'd expected to die here, and to die alone. None of the Ojemba would look for him. Their numbers were not large enough to risk men in fruitless searches for lost comrades. Every time he went out on a mission, he knew he went out alone.

Every day since he'd crashed on this miserable planet, he'd decide to get it over with. He'd stood by the ocean, telling himself to walk in and finish it. If he couldn't fight anymore, what good was he? And each day he turned and walked back into the jungle.

Hope was a hardy plant, to keep growing in a place like Kikk.

It was a brutal, hostile planet. In the season since he'd been stranded here, only the occasional Dusan patrol had stopped by and none of them had landed, just buzzed the surface. They came for the same reason Kalian had sent him here.

They were looking for the lost Garradian outpost.

He could have told them, if it was on Kikk, it wasn't on this continent. He'd had plenty of time to search for it.

Fyn didn't believe in the Garradians or the outpost.

He did believe in killing Dusan. Since they'd over run his planet, it was all he believed in.

But now, as he watched the woman, he remembered other things he had believed in, things he used to feel. He'd cursed the gods, and not just because they'd stranded him here. Why had they sent him this gift now? And what cost would they demand in return?

There was always a cost.

Just before the light faded outside, he pulled a weapon and fired it at the rocks, adding an orange glow to the deepening dark. It provided warmth, but also helped keep the biters out.

Finally, when he wondered if she'd ever wake, she began to stir. He retreated to the other side of the cave and waited...

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Excerpt from Chapter One

Present Day

THE C-130 rumbled through the sky, the propellers cutting determinedly into the gradually thinning air. Melanie Morton had been miserable on the ground in her wet suit and gear, but as the plane went up and the temperature dropped she realized she was an amateur in miserable.

She'd done some crazy—and misery-inducing—things for her television magazine segment, *Make Mel Cry Uncle*, appearing four times a year on *BrightLine Weekly*, but doing a HALO jump with the Navy SEALs was taking crazy thirty thousand feet too high.

Her producer had had to do some heavy duty persuasion before the Navy would allow her to even prepare for the jump, let alone attempt it. They finally agreed, probably because the powers-that-be thought she'd never make it through Hell Week, let alone survive the grueling training regimen that was required prior to the high altitude-low open drop with an actual SEAL team. But here she was, all geared up and only one way to go: down. At one-hundred and twenty miles per hour.

If she'd had any doubts about her sanity, she didn't anymore.

She really was out of her freaking mind.

The sad part, she'd been out of it clear back to when she'd first pitched the idea that had eventually become *Make Mel Cry Uncle*. Since that time she'd learned to fight various sorts of fires. She'd trained with cops and SWATs, trekked to the Arctic, done a stint with the Coast Guard and another in search-and-rescue, gone swimming with sharks, dived to deep sea wreckage—the list was long and getting longer. Four shows a year for five years. *Dang*. So far she hadn't made it into space, but it wasn't because her producer hadn't tried to talk her into it. There was buzz of going back to the moon, but that was so last century. Maybe if they let her go to Mars....

She shook her head. What was she thinking? She still hadn't gotten her tush out of this plane and she was thinking about Mars? She was worse than freaking insane...whatever that might be.

Of course, she could cry uncle and go home. Show over. SEALS happy. Their charity would be even happier because she'd have to ante up the dough and not them. That was the deal, if she cried she donated to their favorite charity. If she didn't, then they had to donate to hers. So far, her charity had made out like a bandit. They loved her. But all good things had to come to an end sometime. So why wasn't her mouth open and why wasn't she crying uncle like a baby?

Her Gran could have supplied the answer. She'd told Mel almost every day of Mel's life that she was the most stubborn person on the face of the earth. It was probably her biggest character flaw, though it wasn't her only one. However, there came a time to face those flaws and defeat them.

Did it really matter if her SEAL team expected her to fail? Was proving them wrong that big of a deal? So what if they had bets on when she'd cry? They were also betting on when she'd wet her pants. It was probably a guy thing.

She looked down the row of faces, seated on the hard, narrow bench with her. All of them were in full scuba gear and each held an oxygen mask, in anticipation of the moment when the cabin would be depressurized. Hers was probably the only face without the tough-guy expression. This was an experienced team of steely-eyed, professional killers who'd proved their chops in Afghanistan and Iraq. They were honest-to-goodness heroes, like her grandfather and her father. She was proud to be sitting with them, even if they did want her to fail.

It wasn't personal. They liked her, or what they knew of her. Some of them had even offered to get to know her on a more personal level and weren't holding a grudge at being turned down. They just wanted her to fail. Only in the movies could a girl make it as a SEAL. It would make them so happy if she failed. It was probably the patriotic thing to do.

It was a pity the necessary word was stuck in her stubborn throat like a freaking hair ball that wouldn't hack up. Even as she was listing the reasons for crying uncle, another part of her brain was pointing out that it was only a jump. Other than the first step and the velocity, it was really no different from her time with the paratroopers. So that made her stubborn and delusional.

There was a saying in the SEALS that the only good day was yesterday. This was her last, bad day. Tomorrow she'd be on her way home, with all her SEAL yesterdays behind her. She could go back and kill her producer. Thanks to the SEALS, she now knew about a hundred different ways. Pity she could only use one of them on him. The aircraft shuddered and then straightened out.

"Three minute warning," Rockman's voice said in her ear piece. They all donned their oxygen masks and then the rear ramp slowly lowered, depressurizing the hold. Mel had thought it was as cold as it could get.

She was wrong.

"Line up!" Rockman spoke again.

Moving like ungainly gooney birds, the team and Mel formed two lines, on either side of the plane, clutching at hanging straps for balance, their footing made precarious by heavy packs, webbed feet and the bouncing of the plane as it rode the air currents. Mel realized she was hyperventilating into her mask. Would the friction and pure oxygen set her lungs on fire? That thought didn't help. Fear Rockman would notice did.

Rockman got nose to nose with her. He didn't need to. She could hear him just fine in the ear piece. On the other hand, he'd spent the last three months with his face in hers telling her to move her butt somewhere other than where it currently was. It was probably a hard habit to break. Maybe it was even a freaking SEAL rule.

"So, Frog Lady, you ready to cry uncle?"

Frog wasn't actually meant to be an insult, even though everything Rockman said sounded like one. This team were divers, hence the frog appellation. Over his shoulder, Mel could see Henry, her rather green-about-the-gills cameraman, recording the moment. It was also his job to record her exit from the plane, or her ignominious defeat. If she did make the jump, then her free-fall would be recorded by mini-cams affixed to the team's head gear. Her *Mel-cam* was so that her viewers could have the illusion of seeing it from her point of view.

So this was it. Decision time. And she needed to pee. No question someone was going to win at least one bet, with the cold lining up against her sphincters. If she was going to be in for a pee, might as well go for the pound. Or in this case, in for the jump.

"Sir, I'm going to jump, sir!" She shouted, because shouting was the only tone Rockman could hear, based on past experience.

He nodded sharply, even as his brown eyes told her he didn't believe her. Mel tried to focus on her instructions, rather than the increasing pressure on her bladder. If she wet her pants now it would probably turn to ice inside her suit. Hopefully it wouldn't form into stalagmites in there. Or was that stalactites? Either was sure to be painful.

"Ladies first." Rockman gave her a sardonic look. Great, now he decides to be a gentleman. She looked at the ramp hanging over thirty thousand feet of atmosphere and ocean and her sphincters gave up the unfair battle, releasing in a warm, wet rush. It

wasn't that bad. And it was as much encouragement as she was going to get on this plane.

"Hoo-yah!" She ran forward and leapt off the ramp into nothing. Six guys who owed her charity money followed her out. She just hoped they weren't bitter about the money. She had a long way to fall with them.

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Review of *Do Wah Diddy Die*:

"When it comes to creating stories with offbeat humor and outrageous situations, Pauline Baird Jones is in a class by herself. A most excellent experience!" Jill Smith, Romantic Times; 4 Stars

Chapter One

An ancient radio was scratching out a Sousa march when Fern Smith unlocked the door of the seedy hotel room and found Donald posing in front of the cracked mirror with an AK-47 held at a military angle across his chest and a bandana knotted around his mostly bald head. He had a long, thin neck that merged into plump jowls, making his head an uncertain rectangle with the wispy remains of his hair trailing around three sides. A hang-dog expression adorned the fourth side. His puny shoulders were jaunty and self-satisfaction gleamed from close-set eyes as he regarded the speckled image in the sub-standard mirror. Because Donald was neither tall nor short—though he could appear either, depending on where he belted his pants across his beer belly—his attempt at Rambo made her wince.

She pushed the door closed with her shoulder and dumped the sacks she carried onto the lumpy surface of the slightly less than double bed. She snapped off the radio, her voice breaking flatly into the sudden silence, "I still think we should have bought the Uzi."

Donald froze like a deer in headlights, then spun to face her. He quickly grabbed the bandana and stuffed it in his back pocket, then produced a wide, hopeful smile as he peered up at her, exposing the gap where his plates didn't meet his gums.

Fern was a tall woman, narrow everywhere but the hips, with stooped shoulders and long arms that made her look like a caricatured bird of prey. Her hair, as wispy as Donald's, was drawn up in an off-center bun. Her narrow mouth, having long ago given in to the force of gravity, sagged on either side of her pointed chin.

"Teddy said—"

"I'm sure what Teddy said had nothing to do with the price." Fern's expression gave no quarter. "If you hadn't let Artie lay out the hit—"

Donald tenderly deposited the AK-47 on the dresser top, retrieved the bandana from his pocket and used it to return its surface to a high gloss. "His tab, his call."

Fern's sigh was silent, but it ruffled the back of what was left of Donald's hair as she reached around him to pick up a photograph of the target. She studied the face, feeling a shiver run down her spine when she made contact with the woman's green gaze. There was something about her eyes, something deep in the mysterious green slits barely visible beneath drooping lids, that made Fern nervous. She tossed the picture down beside the gun.

"His way overdue tab, don't you mean?"

With a triumphant look, Donald pointed at something behind her. She turned and examined the beat up shoe box sitting on the table. With some reluctance she lifted the lid and found neat rows of—

"Ones?" She grabbed a handful and flipped through them with practiced ease. "This is his down payment? A shoe box full of dollar bills?"

"At least it's real."

Fern tossed down the bills with a snort of disgust. "And the rest of it?"

"When the job's done." She raised a skeptical brow. He tried to trump her raise with a whined, "He's good for it," but his voice lacked the conviction. They'd both known Arthur Maxwell for too long.

A stray bit of sun found its way through a spot on the dirty window and fell across the AK-47. Fern gave another soundless sigh. A pity he'd fallen for it. There was no persuading him to take the cute little

Uzi once he'd made up his mind. He was the bopper—the hit man—so he got to choose the gun. It was even possible he knew what he was doing. It hadn't been that long since their retirement.

She watched him hitch his pants up over his sagging belly, then swagger to the bruised cooler stashed in the corner of the room, his knee joints popping with each step.

Then again . . .

"And when we're doing time—" she began.

"We done time before." He extracted a cold one, popped the top and took a noisy swig. At least he hadn't used his teeth. With their financial hopes riding on an AK-47, they couldn't afford to replace his lousy plates.

Fern crossed her arms. "Not in this state."

He had to think about that for a moment as he mentally ran down the list of places they had done time. "Do you good to make new friends."

He sank into a sagging armchair and gave her a hopeful look.

"We got enough trouble with your old friends."

Donald scowled. "Don't start on Artie again—"

"I ain't stopped—" She shook her head. "You shoulda popped him the first time he poked his face in the door."

Why did Donald put up with him? What was the deal with men and their crib mates? Just because they pissed in the same pot, they had to be friends for life? Only bright spot, Artie didn't pop up that often because he was usually in stir making new friends. She'd feel more comfortable about the whole hit if she could just figure out why Artie wanted the Seymour woman out of the way so bad he was willing to pay *them* to do it. Artie had made not paying his own way his life's work.

"I don't like it. Too much that can go wrong."

"It's not what I'd choose," Donald admitted. "But there's logic to it. Really," he insisted when she arched her brows again. "Drive-by isn't

what I'd choose myself. But then, I've always liked the high ground." He took another noisy drink, before adding, "I've had time to think and it's not as bad as it seems. First place, there's your element of surprise. Look how good the St. Valentines Day massacre worked." He directed a triumphant look at Fern. "Taking someone out with a bang is a fine, old tradition."

He had to be joking, but a cursory examination proved her wrong.

"Come on, Fern. We can do this. You drive the car. I'll point the gun. It's what we do—"

"It's what we *did*—"

"When it's over, we're rolling in scratch."

The look in his eyes was one she was sadly familiar with. A mixture of calculated entreaty and seedy charm, liberally mixed with greed. She was too old to stop giving in to him—or to stop trusting his well-honed survival instinct. She sighed, trailing her finger the length of the AK-47. It was cool and smooth—like she used to be.

Hadn't she always done everything she could to avoid the dreary anonymity her parents had settled for? Their walk-up apartment in Dayton wasn't a mirror of her parents' suburban hell in Jersey, but there were similarities when she let herself see them. Bingo at McDonald's instead of bridge at the country club. The occasional bus tour with other down-and-out senior citizens instead of summers at the seaside. Her parents had never lived wild or gone somewhere exotic. They had always been smugly content with the mainland U.S.

"Enough to go to Disney World."

Her parents had never been to Disney World. Damn the boy, he knew she wanted to go to Disneyland more than anything. She wanted her picture taken with Mickey Mouse in front of that castle more than she wanted to quit taking stupid hormones.

"Ain't she a beauty, Fernie?" Donald said.

She sighed. If they had to shoot the hell out of some woman to do it—

"It's not an Uzi, but I suppose it'll get the job done," she conceded reluctantly.

"And then some." He mimed rapid firing.

She turned, pushing her worries to the back burner. From one of the sacks she'd dumped on the bed, she extracted two pairs of joke glasses—the Groucho Marx kind with dark frames, large noses, and mustaches attached. One pair she handed to Donald, the other she put on, adjusting the fit. Then she took a large muffelatta out of another sack.

"Get me a beer, will you?" she asked.

Donald put his glasses on, also adjusted their fit, and bent over the cooler, his pants sliding down to display his hairy butt crack.

Fern did a quick right turn from the sight and spread their lunch out on the rickety table. Donald sat down in front of his half of the sandwich.

"What's this?" Donald handed her the beer and, with a suspicious look, examined the offering, a huge half round of crusty bread layered with spicy meats and cheeses and topped with a tangy olive dressing.

"Muffelatta." Her mouth formed the unfamiliar words with the satisfaction of knowing this was another thing her parents had probably never done.

"Smells good." He took a huge bite, chewed a couple of times, then said, thickly through the remains of the bite, "Is good."

Fern studied her sandwich with satisfaction.

"What about wheels?" she asked, before biting down.

"We'll pick a car up right before we head for the airport."

It was a peculiarity of Donald's, this waiting for the last minute to pick up a car. The three times he'd secured wheels early, he'd done jail time. He also had a pair of black, thong underwear he wore, but Fern tried not to think about that. There were some parts of her middle-class upbringing she couldn't shed, no matter how far she got from it.

She watched him chew for a moment, then asked, "Do you think we could steal something, well, foreign this time?"

Donald had strong feelings about driving American cars, but he got to pick the gun. Time for turn-about.

He looked up. She looked at the AK-47. It lay on the dresser, still gleaming dully in that stray bit of sun.

His struggle with the idea of making even a minor adjustment in his MO was written on his face in large, block letters. With a timing honed through long years together, she raised one brow. He grinned.

"Sure, Fernie, whatever you want." He bit deeply into his almost decimated sandwich. His gaze strayed longingly to her half of the sandwich.

With only a moment's hesitation, she shoved it towards him. His appetite was always keen before a kill.

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A review of *Pig in a Park*:

"... a remarkable new talent... Pauline Baird Jones and her hilarious novel PIG IN A PARK make their debut. Written in first person, this adventurous romp is a 14 karat gem, and I for one would love to see more from this vastly amusing author." Four & 1/2 Stars from

Romantic Times

Chapter One

I'd never have gotten mixed up in the first murder if Mrs. Macpherson hadn't caught the flu, but I can't blame her for a capricious fate rolling the "who's turn is it to be smitten?" dice and my name--Isabel Stanley--coming up.

Isabel. Picture someone petite, fragile, done in soft pastels, lusciously formed and you'll know how I don't look. Most people find it less

stressful to call me Stan, when faced with a reality that is tall, lots of leg, and colored in brown and paste . . . with crayon.

Don't get me wrong. Being darn near invisible isn't the worst thing that can happen to you. Ask my sister Rosemary about her ex. Just be sure to do it from a safe distance. Calling her spitting mad isn't an exercise in the theoretical.

I used to be a safe distance from her and my mother until six months ago when my instinct for survival got swamped by guilt because my sister's divorce happened to coincide with our dad's abrupt exit from this mortal coil. Since my livelihood is done with computer and sketch pad for the benefit of slightly dysfunctional children, I was able to make the move from New Orleans to Arlington, Virginia almost painlessly.

Painless isn't possible with my mother in the mix. She's a fundamentalist Baptist and thinks that giving life and voice to a roach named Cochran, no matter how spunky and cute, is just tacky. That it pays very well only adds insult to her imagined injury.

With that attitude, there's no way I'm telling her about my secret yearning to add romance writing to my roach credits. It won't be an issue for some time. Romance novels are harder to write than they look and being raised by said Fundamental Baptist isn't the best preparation for writing love scenes.

Not too surprisingly, our dysfunctional little family was rubbing along about as smoothly as chalk on a blackboard when Mrs. Macpherson got the flu, sending my life screeching off into a dangerous and embarrassing new direction.

I had no premonition of impending danger when I said I'd fill in for Mrs. M during the youth choir practice. I like playing the organ and they have hot chocolate afterwards. Gourmet hot chocolate. They have to. It's January in our tiny suburb of DC and our church is old and cold. If circulation isn't restored quickly, maiming is inevitable.

Since I have an aversion to getting maimed and my blood was thoroughly thinned by my residence down South, I dressed for the impending arctic conditions. Starting with thermals, I worked my way out to jeans and a woolly mammoth sweater, finishing with snow socks and boots. I pulled my hair back in its usual braid and brushed artificial roses to a bloom along my unremarkable cheekbones. When I

could do no more, I collected coat, hat and gloves, and opened the door that separated my over-the-garage apartment-by-Goodwill from my sister's House Beautiful.

Though Rosemary and I started from the same fertilized egg, she is able to manage her assets better than me . . . with the notable exception of Dag Kenyon, scum bag of the universe and the husband who came, screwed her over and went.

Down in the kitchen I found into my mother watching the war on CNN. I knew I would. Just like I knew her meticulously plucked brows would make that arc into her gray fringe when she saw my clothing choice. "Slacks for church, Isabel?"

"It's cold and I'm allergic to frostbite." I bent to root through the refrigerator for pickles.

"You'll reek of pickle if you use your fingers like that. Reverend Hilliard particularly dislikes pickles."

Pickle jar in hand, I looked up in time to catch the match-making gleam in her eye. Surely she wasn't that desperate to remove the stain of singleness from my name?

What was I thinking? Of course she was that desperate. The only thing she wanted more than my marriage to a testosterone carrier was Rosemary's ex-husband castrated and forced to live out his life as an impotent handyman for a women's sorority.

She's still got some work to do on the forgiveness thing.

"How could anyone hate pickles?" Holding her avid gaze with my limpid one, I deliberately submerged my hand in the jar, then wiped the pungent residue down the side of my jeans. If I had to, I'd hang dill around my neck to keep him away. No way I was getting intimate with a guy that close to God.

"Maybe her tight jeans will distract him from the smell," my sister Rosemary said from the doorway, with a shadowed smile. Suffering agreed with her. Our mutual assets still looked better hanging from her bones than they ever had from mine.

"They are very tight," my mother began.

Luckily for me the telephone rang and dislocated the conversation. Before any of us could answer it, Rosemary's eldest daughter, Candice swirled into the room and scooped up the receiver. Telephone answering is the only known benefit of having a thirteen year old in the house.

"Jeez, it's for you, Stan." She thrust the telephone at me like I'd committed a crime, then vanished like a comet, leaving a shimmering trail of hormones quivering in the air to mark her passage.

My mother stared at the place where Candice had been for a moment, then turned to look down her nose at me. "I wish you wouldn't encourage the children to call you Stan. Isabel is a lovely name."

No one needed encouragement to call me Stan, but I didn't waste breath pointing this out. "Hello?"

"Isabel?"

No one except Muir Kenyon who would be at the top of my mother's potential husband list, purely because of his lukewarm interest in me if he weren't also the brother of Rosemary's ex-husband. It's all very awkward but Muir is so clue-less he hasn't figured that out yet.

"Hello, Muir."

"I was wondering if you would care to join me for a cup of hot chocolate this evening? I wrote this new computer program I'd like to show you." Muir's monotone droning in my ear barely registered until he mentioned chocolate.

Somehow Muir has realized I love hot chocolate like hobbits love mushrooms, while totally missing the fact that I hate to hear about his computer programs.

"Gee, I'm sorry, Muir. Reverend Hilliard asked me to play the organ for youth choir tonight."

"Well, that shouldn't last long. It's a school night, isn't it? Can we meet afterwards? I designed this program myself--"

"I don't think so."

"I'll call you tomorrow then."

He would, too. It was depressing, but I didn't have time to dwell on it. I had to leave before I compounded my sins by being late. I hung up the telephone and shrugged on my jacket, while surreptitiously examining Rosemary from under my lashes. She seemed to be in a fairly good mood.

"Could I borrow your Mercedes, Rose? My car was raised in New Orleans and doesn't know how to put out heat."

She frowned. Rosemary is a trifle possessive with her things. When we were kids in nursery school she used to spend the whole playtime with her toys stacked in the corner, guarding them from forays by other kids. Time has not modified this tendency much. Added to the equation is my tendency to sometimes daydream while I drive, even occasionally ending up somewhere other than where I intended. Which doesn't mean I've put a scratch on anything--of hers.

I watched her struggle between her protective passion for the car she'd wrested from her husband in the divorce settlement and the lowering knowledge she needed me to drive carpool in the morning because she had a class in glue gun technique.

"The keys are in my purse. Just be careful," she muttered.

"I'll treat it like it was my own."

Her brows shot up. "Not good enough."

"None of those accidents were my fault," I protested. "New Orleans is an automotive Bermuda Triangle!"

"One scratch--"

"Cross my heart and hope to die if I don't take care of your precious car." How lightly I said those words as I pulled on my wool fedora, tugging it down over my ears. How fate must have chortled (what does a chortle sound like anyway?) while my mother tsk-tsked and adjusted the hat to a more suitable angle on my head. When she was satisfied, she gave my cheek a pat that was partly fond, partly annoyed, and let me escape out the door for my rendezvous with destiny.

As soon as I was out of her sight, I jerked my hat down again. It was cold and I'm a grownup who can do what she likes when her mother isn't looking.

#

When the youthful hallelujahs faded into the frigid halls, I followed the hormonal herd to the kitchen for my earthly reward: the promised gourmet hot chocolate fix. At first the brew was too hot to drink, so I wrapped my hands around my cup, letting the warmth sink into my chilled fingers while I sniffed the fragrant, heavenly steam. After a time, I blew on the surface, took a tentative sip, then closed my eyes and savored the rich bouquet, the hint of hazel nut--

"Stanley!" Jerome Jeffries, youthfully oblivious to the finer nuances of hot chocolate consumption, pulled me to one side. "We got us a job!"

I guess this is where I admit I play keyboard in a band. Jerome, cuter than Val Kilmer, a mere twenty years old, and the guiding light of the band, recruited me shortly after I moved home. It wasn't hard. I let myself be briefly dazzled with visions of jiving to "Wild Thing" or "I Love Rock'n Roll."

Very briefly.

Jerome had his sights set on becoming another Harry Connick, Jr. I thought we should call ourselves "Sad," but Jerome liked "Star Dust" better. So did my mother, who also pointed out that I was too old for such nonsense. I told her that actually I was too young.

For this reason, I greeted Jerome's announcement of a new gig with some wariness.

"Please tell me it's not another anniversary?" Anniversaries made my mother start digging up blind dates. Didn't matter to her that there were good reasons these guys were still single. Scary reasons.

"This is totally not an anniversary." His mouth curved into a grin that could have taught Tom Cruise a thing or two about grinning.

"It's a rally in support of the troops of Desert Storm at Grant Park! You won't believe this, but we've been asked to play back-up for the one and only Lee Greenwood!"

I waited a moment, but he didn't grin again.

"Lee Greenwood! Wow!" I paused. "Who's Lee Greenwood?"

Jerome laughed like I had told a great joke. Laughing kinked the area around his eyes, his mouth and my mid-section. I sipped my chocolate, the scientific equivalent of pouring gasoline on a fire. I tugged at the collar of my sweater. Perhaps the thermals were a mistake.

Tommy, our bass guitarist and dead ringer for Tom Cruise, mistook this for a summons and joined us. Okay, so it wasn't just the long held dream of playing in a band that made me agree to play bubble music on my weekends. I'm a Baptist, not a saint.

After more exclamations of mutual delight, we agree to get together before the rally to rehearse. I downed the last of my chocolate as I watched them leave, almost reeling when the combined heat of their cute and gourmet chocolate surged into my face, making my eyebrows sizzle and emit steam. Not content with sizzle, the heat spread out, seeking those parts of my body encased in thermal and wool. Time to get cool.

I headed for the door, but got cut off at the pass by Reverend Hilliard. I was starting to sweat buckets while the overhead lights put a halo around his cool blonde hair. He smiled at me, two rows of gleaming, reverential teeth that nearly blinded me. The guy looked like he'd been born with the clerical collar around his neck.

I fought back a sudden urge to repent of my recent lusting.

"I can't thank you enough for helping us out, Miss Stanley. I pray it didn't disarrange you too much?"

He probably had prayed. Scary thought.

"It was no problem. I'm glad to help out the kids."

He smiled again, upping my guilt level dangerously.

I quickly added, "I really have to be going. I have Rosemary's car and she likes it home by ten."

He looked at me uncertainly. I took this for consent and fled. Outside the cold air sizzled against my hot cheeks. In another moment I'd spontaneously combust. I quickly stripped off the jacket, hat and gloves, tossing them into the back seat, then slid in and started the motor. The heater blew cold. Before it could change its mind, I switched it to cold vent and opened the sunroof, welcoming the combined rush of frigid air across my gently steaming face and neck.

Earlier, snow had mixed with rain. Clouds still obscured the stars, but the air was now dry and empty. In the fitful light of the street lamps, the road gleamed slick and empty. I drove cautiously, enjoying the feel of fresh air, sweet solitude --a rare commodity in our over stocked household--and a great car to drive.

Pleasantly tired and full of chocolate, I drove in auto-pilot, my thoughts drifting to my current romance novel with its impending love scene that I still didn't know how to write.

"Get a better imagination or a lover, Stan," my agent had advised, the one time I'd let her read a draft.

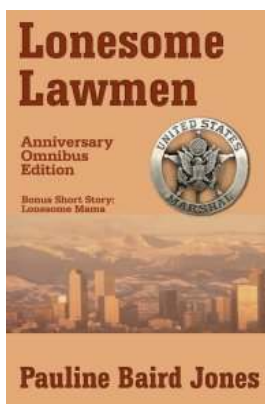
"Maybe I should get a new agent," I muttered. About then I saw the stop sign and hit the brakes. Across the intersection, an unfamiliar street retreated into murk, lit only by the faint glow of the street lamps.

"Great." I'd done it again. I crossed the intersection, straining to read the signs. The names were vaguely familiar, but I couldn't place myself relative to home--

To my right, several firecrackers went off, one right after the other.

Then a man burst through the bay window of a house.

For more information on ordering this book, visit www.paulinebjones.com



This omnibus includes *The Last Enemy*, *Byte Me and Missing You*, as well as the original short story, "Lonesome Mama." Books and short story are also available individually.

Pauline Baird Jones
www.perilouspauline.com

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Review of *The Last Enemy*:

"A highly suspenseful, should-be-a-movie, totally entertaining tale of derring-do, THE LAST ENEMY defies categorization--at least by me. All I can tell you is: I enjoyed every word and was sorry when I reached the end. If you really liked the movie, ROMANCING THE STONE, then you will absolutely love THE LAST ENEMY and be clamoring at Hollywood's gates to make this book into the next "really great movie." Very Highly Recommended, Under the Cover Reviews



Excerpt from *The Last Enemy*

Chapter One

FEAR FOLLOWED Dani Gwynne out of sleep, drying her throat to parchment, turning her muscles to wood and digging up her longing to go fetal and whine.

Where--? Oh yeah. The safe house. In Denver. Colorado.

Dani took an unsteady breath. Water would restore the moisture to her throat, but fetal and whining had to be reburied and quickly. Things like that got recorded in "The File." After eight months in protective custody, Dani was suffering from an acute case of lost privacy.

"You awake?" Peg's husky murmur drifted on the same cooled air that circulated the smoke from her cigarette. The Deputy US Marshal had gone from occasional to chain smoker in just over two months, but Dani would bet money that wouldn't make it into "The File."

"Yeah." Dani rubbed her face.

"Another bad dream?" Peg asked, sympathetically.

Bad dream? The hired killer, Dani called him Dark Lord for lack of a real name, did a brief encore inside her head. She gave a slight twitch. Certainly not a good dream, but at least it hadn't been the one where

he held her head under a sea of blood until her lungs exploded. Now that was a bad dream.

"I just need to pee," Dani said. Dreams made it into the file, peeing didn't. She hoped.

The Deputy US Marshal, a dark silhouette against the carefully drawn drapes, gave a tiny, skeptical cough as she checked her wristwatch. "Bang on five a.m."

Smoke made lazy spirals toward the ceiling from her cigarette, then did a sharp right turn when it strayed into the A/C current that had just kicked on. The low hum gave a questioning voice to the waiting silence.

Peg lifted the cigarette and inhaled it, then released more smoke from her mouth and nose in a weary sigh. "I've started setting my watch by your bladder."

"My parts and I are glad we could help. Really." Dani sat up and peeled the sheet off her sticky body. She felt like she'd run a marathon instead of merely survived another night's sleep in protective custody. Her body was too stiff to get vertical without help. The book-loaded night stand was all there was, so she used it. The flimsy wooden pedestal rocked perilously, then sent her stack of books tumbling to the floor in a flurry. *The Two Towers*, second in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, landed between her feet with a symbolic thump.

Dani had enjoyed the books more when she'd had less in common with the sturdy, stalked hobbit, Frodo. Probably not a good idea to name the man who hunted her after Frodo's Nemesis, particularly with the sun playing coy in the East.

In her own home, back in the days when no one wanted to kill her, Dani would have immediately stooped to pick up her books. She wanted to be that person now. She hated this drop in standards nearly as much as the endless waiting, but bending wasn't on her option list this morning.

She plowed doggedly through the mess. In the bathroom she groped for, then found the light switch, flinched as light flooded the small space. The mirror gave back her reflection without mercy.

Ouch. In the old days, a good day and the right light helped her pass for attractive. She touched the lines around her eyes. Bad day, wrong light.

Life was hard enough without the added stress of being hunted like Bambi's mother, though it was a good way to lose weight. Yesterday she'd seen her hip bones for the first time in years.

They didn't look as good as she'd remembered.

"Note to myself," she muttered, "never again make a note to myself to *lose weight even if it kills you.*"

If ever there were a time to be in denial, this was it.

Dani draped a towel over the mirror and turned her attention to what had brought her into the bathroom.

Physical relief achieved, she turned on the water, washed her hands, then filled two glasses and carried them back into the bedroom. One she handed to Peg, the other she lifted in a mocking toast. "To the dawn. May it come quickly."

Peg obliged by clicking her glass against Dani's, before edging back the blinds just enough to study the sky. "It's already getting lighter."

"That's good." Dani accepted the lie, despite a brief glimpse of blue velvet untouched by light. She sipped the water, her hand not quite steady. The sense of menace felt sharper tonight, as if Dark Lord had tapped into her fear and was using it to track her.

It's just your imagination. Dani took a long drink of water. They call it a *safe* house, remember?

Another drink of water. It didn't erase the acrid taste of fear from her mouth or ease the dryness in her throat and it tasted woefully flat to a palate conditioned to a Diet Dr. Pepper wake up call. A pity she drank the last can yesterday evening. Neuman, the special agent-in-charge, had promised to bring her some when he and McBride came back. She frowned. Odd they hadn't returned yet.

She lowered her glass and found Peg watching her. This wasn't unusual. They all watched her, their eyes reflecting varying degrees of

professional worry and distant pity. Probably looking for signs she was about to break.

I bend, not break, she could have told them, if they'd asked. Breaking wasn't an option until after her day in court. She'd made a promise to a dead woman.

Dani dropped into the desk chair, propped her elbow on the smooth *faux* wood surface and cradled the cool glass against her aching temple. The furtive light winked off Peg's glass as she took a drink, her hand quivering slightly from the effort.

They made quite a pair. The romance writer and the Marshal. Brought together by capricious fate. Too bad Peg had the misfortune to look enough like Dani to be her sister, though her recent visit to the ER had made that resemblance a *twin* sister. The dim light deepened the hollows in Peg's cheeks and washed out all color but the bruising under her eyes.

How did Peg do it, Dani wondered? How had she puked her guts out, then dragged her butt back here to play decoy for a killer one last night?

It's my job, wasn't enough of an answer. Peg didn't have to be here. In a few hours Dani would be transferred into the care and keeping of the Denver Marshals district. They'd have responsibility for getting her safely into court next week. Peg could have stayed in the hospital. She'd done her duty, above and way beyond.

Instead she'd come back a couple of hours ago, claiming her multiple hurl had been caused by the Chinese they'd had for their last supper together. Even the original OJ jury wouldn't have bought a selective food poisoning theory.

Not that Dani wasn't grateful. Would've been harder to face the dismal dawn with just the men for company. They were good guys and reassuringly competent, but there was something to that "community of women" thing.

"You gonna make it 'till Neuman and McBride get back?" Dani asked.

"I'm okay."

"Yeah, sure." *You're okay. I'm okay. We're all okay*--and Clinton didn't inhale. "You shouldn't have come back."

"I'm fine," Peg insisted, looking at her watch before taking another drag on her cigarette.

"You didn't tell Neuman, did you?" Dani almost envied her that cigarette. Popping an M&M didn't have nearly the dramatic effect of blowing smoke, which was practically the international symbol for waiting.

"He'll find out when he comes."

"He'll be pissed." Dani didn't mind Neuman getting pissed. She didn't mind anything that relieved the monotony. Who would have thought trying not to get killed could be so boring?

"He'll get over it." Peg hesitated. "And it's only for a few more hours."

"Yeah, a few more hours." Dani set down her glass, splashing water perilously close to her lap top. Surprised at her lack of precision, she moved the glass onto the window sill, then dabbed at the damp with the corner of her tee shirt.

The Velcro edge of her money belt scraped her wrist with yet another reminder of how far from home, how far from normal she'd come. Was it petty to miss her purse with all its useful and useless bits and pieces? To sweat the myriad of small things she couldn't do until she did her thing in court? To be so weary of this portable existence she almost didn't care anymore?

Probably.

Easier to sweat the small things than contemplate the big ones. Like dying before she made it into court?

"So what are you and Neuman going to do once you've handed me off?" Dani hurried into speech again.

"Do? Neuman and I? What do you mean?" Peg's voice sounded a little too noncommittal.

"Did you think *I* wouldn't notice the hearts and flowers around whenever you and Neuman are in the same room?"

"I suppose you can't help seeing romance everywhere you look."
Weary gave way for ironic in Peg's eyes.

"It's one of the main requirements for writing it." Dani turned sideways, trailing her hands across the quiescent keyboard of her laptop. From habit her fingers settled in home position on the smooth, cool keys. The dark screen looked naked without her words scrolling across. The words that kept her sane and paid the bills after her marriage fell apart. The stories that gave her a place to escape to in the past few months.

"Did you get your story sorted out?" Peg asked. "I was hoping I could read the last two chapters before I leave."

"Like the real people in my life, my characters are proving difficult."

A wan smile edged Peg's mouth. "I expect you'll have *them* whipped into shape before your deadline."

"I expect I will." Dani realized she was tapping out an "SOS" on the keyboard and jerked her hands back, but not before Peg heard the soft sound of the keys.

"You can't start writing now. They'll be here soon. I'm not hanging out that damn boa," she said, referring to the joke gift the guys had given Dani for her birthday last month, a gift that Dani had converted into a "do not disturb" sign while working against the double deadline imposed by trial and editor.

Dani grinned. In the past eight months, the guys had given up a lot of preconceptions about romance writers. Like the one about them working naked except for a strategically placed boa. Dani had felt obliged to point out that naked was very cold and most women didn't like uncovering what time and gravity had done to their parts.

They gave her that one, but clung stubbornly to the conviction that romance authors were sex-starved idiots, this despite the fact that she'd failed to jump any of their bones or the long hours she put in at the keyboard. They did seem surprised she could do it under the circumstances.

Even with "The File," they didn't seem to understand she'd never missed a deadline. She wasn't about to let a hired killer or her murderous ex-brother-in-law make her miss this one. Besides, it gave

her something to do in-between getting grilled by Richard's slime ball defense attorney. He'd stopped short of accusing her of the murder, but she expected to be trying on gloves and Bruno Magli shoes when Richard's trial finally got under way. If--

"I'm not planning to work," Dani said in a rush.

"So, what are you doing?"

"I'm--" not about to admit she was SOS-ing, Dani improvised, "thinking about going online. I could check out the chat lines, see if my favorite ex-spy is around." He and her other online friends had, in a strange way, kept her anchored to the real, been her lifeline to the normal.

"I'll never understand that online shit." Peg shook her head wearily. "And if Neuman finds out about your little incursions into cyberspace, it'll be my ass--"

"He won't find out. Besides, he's obviously too hot for your ass to care." Dani flipped on the power, waiting impatiently for the machine to complete the booting up process so she could access her online program. When she was in, she hit the dial command. "Why don't you lie down? Catch a few Z's? Nothing happening for a few more hours."

"Not when I'm on duty."

"You're not on duty. You're not even supposed to be here--" Dani frowned at the screen. "That's odd."

"What's odd?"

"I'm not getting a dial tone." Dani tried the dial command again. Still nothing. "Is something wrong with the phone?" She looked at Peg.

Peg hesitated. In that tiny moment of silence, they both heard a muffled thud in the next room.



Review of *Byte Me*:

"Ms. Jones makes a large splash with each new book and BYTE ME is no exception. The intricate plot and

Pauline Baird Jones
www.perilouspauline.com

compelling characters make this a nail-biting read." Four and one-half stars and a December Top Pick, Romantic Times Magazine

Excerpt from *Byte Me*:

Prologue

Overhead, tiny pinpoints of light gave depth to the moonless night sky, while thirty stories down, miniature streetlights made a path for the occasional car to follow. The silence was so deep, Phoebe Mentel heard her own breath whispering in and out of her lungs. She leaned on the parapet and studied the tower across from her and her companion, taking the moment to find her focus and quiet her mind.

"You ready?" he asked. She turned as he dropped his bundle of equipment at her feet and knelt to extract the rocket launcher. He was dressed to steal in deepest black. Only his eyes gleamed out of the dark, eyes far too blue to be true.

Lucky for her, she didn't need true. She needed there.

"I was born ready." She spoke softly, but her voice, lightly laced with her mother's Southern charm, sounded loud in her ears. Also dressed to blend with the night, she'd covered her chin length hair with a black stocking cap and smeared her face with blacking until only her brown eyes were visible.

His smile came fast and white, cutting into his dark silhouette like a lost Cheshire cat before fading back into the night. He readied the launcher, then used the parapet to steady his arms as he sighted in on the shadowy outline of the tower opposite.

A pop. A hiss. A double strand of rope snaked across the gap between the two buildings in a gleaming, silver arc. A muffled *clunk* found its way back to their ears.

He tugged on the rope until the grappling hook resisted. He tested it for give. There was none. He leaned back, using his full weight to tug again. It still held. He secured their end with brisk, practiced economy, then bent to check his climbing harness. When

he'd shouldered his pack and was securely anchored to the rope, he looked at her.

Phoebe adjusted her earpiece. "You receiving?"

He nodded. "You?"

"Soft and clear."

"Catch you on the flip side." He gave her a cheeky salute and vaulted over the parapet into space. The double rope sagged but held as he disappeared into the night. After a time the tension on the rope eased.

"It's a go." His voice in her ear confirmed what her eyes saw. Her turn to step up and do or die.

In a perfect mimicry of his actions, Phoebe took her place at the parapet. A confident vault, her body kept angled against a gravity more imagined than felt, then the slide into darkness. Moving slowly at first, she quickly picked up speed. The side of the building formed out of shadow. She curled her legs and thrust out with her feet, using the resulting bounce to swing up and hook the edge of the roof. Her partner, programmed to be gallant, reached down and pulled her up beside him.

Phoebe shed her pack and knelt by the grill over the building's airshaft and quickly removed it, while he got out their equipment, all of it the latest in high-tech gadgetry. When she'd exposed the alarm wires bypassed them, they roped up again and started down the shaft, following a route laid out in her head. It was a gift, a talent, an instinct that was as much a part of her physiology as her eyes and hair and what she'd heard was her father's nose. If there was a way to get to something, a path to follow, she could find it.

Deep in the building's bowels, cutting-edge technology opened the wall they needed to access as easy as a whore spread her legs, giving them the prize they sought. They lost two minutes when a guard broke routine, but made up the time on the trip back to their starting point. Phoebe released the rope and drew it in with a sigh of relief.

"I think that was our best time yet," her companion said, the English accent giving the words more importance than they deserved.

Phoebe frowned. "If we could shave off another sixty seconds—"

The muffled shrill of her telephone, followed by the harsh whine of two computers attempting communication, cut across her words with a warning that her virtual reality game was about to be invaded.

Phoebe looked around, wondering where, from which direction, the invasion would come, but when Phagan spoke, his voice, disembodied and synthesized, came at her from the star studded night "sky."

"Playing with Steele again, Pathphinder?"

"Phagan." Phoebe touched a button on her headset, deleting the virtual Remington Steele she'd used as her partner-in-crime. She crossed virtual arms. "Coming down? Or are we playing God tonight?"

It was his favorite role, in virtual or real reality.

The darkness to her right rippled, and a figure stepped out from behind a ventilation stack. On Phagan's cue, not Phoebe's, the moon rose to light his entrance as Deputy US Marshal Samuel Gerrard from "The Fugitive."

She grinned inside her headset. Trust him to crash her B&E game with a lawman. The boy had always had a dark and wicked sense of humor.

"My enemies, and some of my friends, say I can only play Lucifer," he drawled, his voice only slightly less disembodied now that he was "earthbound."

"I'll pretend to disagree if you've cast me decently this time." Phoebe trusted Phagan with her life but not her dignity. Never with her dignity.

He walked a circle around her, his purloined visage showing a wicked appreciation for the female form. "I'm feeling benign tonight, with a taste for Meg Ryan."

"I look like Meg Ryan?"

He arched "Sam's" brows. "Do you mind?"

"Why should I? She's cute and her thighs are smaller than mine."

Phagan laughed, throwing "Sam's" head back. The faint, artificial light was kind to the craggy face and dark tumble of stolen hair. Sam seemed amazingly real—as long as Phagan kept his mouth shut. When he didn't, he sounded like the android from hell. Phagan never used his own voice. Like God, he preferred a mouthpiece.

She'd been playing his games for seven years and still couldn't put an actual face or a voice to him. Sometimes, in her real world, she'd study the faces around her, wondering if one of them belonged to him. There were things he'd said, things he did that told her he'd seen *her* more than once.

"You do it?" he asked, nodding in the direction of the building across the way.

"Despite you wanting the timing tighter than Meg Ryan's thighs."

"You needed a challenge. The last one was too easy."

"Not my fault," Phoebe said. "You're the wizard of virtual world."

He straddled a ventilation pipe, sat and flashed his stolen grin.

She smiled back, but absently. She had to tell him, but she didn't want to. She wanted to keep the past at bay, but she couldn't. It nicked her present like paper cutting skin, welling scarlet from the breach, burning like acid.

"What?"

Instead of speaking, Phoebe produced a couple of virtual cigars, handing one to him and "lighting" hers. Virtual smoke was no threat to her lungs and it gave her something to do with her hands. A wise precaution, since even in virtual world Phagan could read them like a Gypsy.

With a purloined brow cocked, he took his and lit up, blowing smoke out in a stream before asking, "We celebrating something?"

Phoebe looked at Phagan but "Sam's" cool dark stare deflected her ability to read him, even as she felt his X-ray scrutiny rake her

from top to toe. She blew a series of perfect smoke circles, with a little help from the computer program, before saying as flatly as she could, "I found him."

Phagan stood up, took a drag of the cigar, then rolled the brown cylinder between his fingers as he considered her words. "You sure?"

Phoebe lowered her cigar, her hands a work of rock-steady art. "I'm sure."

Phagan turned his virtual high beams on her, waiting for more. With a vaguely frustrated sigh, she gave it to him. "He's had some work done on his face. But I'd know his eyes if he'd turned himself into a woman."

"Sam" looked thoughtful. He sent some smoke rings out to ambush hers, before asking as if it didn't matter, "Where?"

She looked at him, feeling a brief moment of real amusement take the edge off her angst. "Denver."

Phagan had Sam do surprise. "No shit? How'd we miss him?"

"He's been playing Howard Hughes recluse."

Phagan crushed out the cigar. "So how'd you spot him?"

"Apparently he's decided to come out. Caught his mug in the newspaper. It seems--" Phoebe couldn't stop the quiver in her hands from playing out in front of Phagan, "he's almost got himself engaged to a prominent widow."

"Sam's" gaze got sharper. "Kids?"

"Two." Phoebe licked her dry lips inside the VR helmet. "Girls."

He nodded slowly. "Right. I'll contact Ollie. Make sure he's ready to move when you are."

"I'm ready." Inside the headset where he couldn't see, Phoebe's mouth curved in a smile seared by her acid past. "He made me ready."



Review of *Missing You*:

"Fans of Tami Hoag, Iris Johansen, and Catherine Coulter's Sherlock and Savich series will find Jones' fast-paced and suspenseful romance satisfying, even though it's kinder and gentler...Teen fans of contemporary adult romantic suspense may enjoy this even though the protagonists are middle aged." Booklist

Excerpt from *Missing You*:

Chapter One

Snow flakes fell thick and fast as Luke Kirby stopped his 4x4 in front of the family cabin, just south of Estes Park. On a clear day, Long's Peak, rising up from Rocky Mountain National Park, was visible from their cabin, but tonight his headlights were having trouble penetrating more than a few yards ahead. The wind was kicking up the fallen snow, and mixing it with falling snow, erasing not just the tracks his truck had made on the dirt road, but the place where sky and earth met, turning the world into a disorienting, white tunnel.

The storm hadn't been bad when he left Denver but had quickly turned nasty with the rise in altitude. If the storm hadn't moved quickly to cut off his retreat, he might have turned back and faced a family determined to distract him from the significance of tomorrow, the anniversary of the death of his wife, Rosemary.

He rested his arms on the steering wheel, remembering a time when he couldn't think the word "dead," not about Rosemary, who had been so very much alive. He knew all the euphemisms and all the synonyms for death. None of them had changed the reality of being left alive, being left alone in a world without her. How he'd hated it. He'd spent a lot of time dodging being alone, trying to stay too busy, too surrounded by people, to face it. He'd loved the "ball and chain," had relished being one half of a whole that included her.

A platitude, but true—time did heal. So gradually had time done its work, he hardly noticed at first. One day he'd realized he was

above the shadows. Not happy, but no longer sad, and possibly, finally able to feel whole—and be whole—all by himself.

If someone asked him why he was here on this bitter night, instead of with his family, he could tell them it *wasn't* because he was trying to live in the past or because he begrudged his brothers their happiness. They'd earned their time with their women the hard way. Matt and Dani (who would always be Louise to him, the name she told him when they first met) had saved each other from the jaws of death up on Long's Peak just over two years ago.

Jake had saved his Phoebe's butt, and now she regularly kicked his up over his ears. Luke couldn't see that Jake minded, in fact, he seemed happy to bend over and present for her boot. He had a tiger by the tail with that girl.

Luke grinned. Even Matt had given in to the Phoebe juggernaut, after strong initial resistance, going so far as to allow her to stand as godmother to the first third-generation Kirby male. Young Mark had them all wrapped around his tiny, pink finger. Even Phoebe was seriously smitten. He expected her to enter the motherhood stakes any day now.

The only two people more amusing than his brothers were Bryn Bailey, Jake's FBI partner-in-crime solving, and Dewey Hyatt, Phoebe's former partner-in-crime committing. He just hoped he was there when Bryn realized she was in love with her pet criminal, though Jake had hinted she also had softer feelings for the elusive, Phagan, who Dewey was supposed to be helping her hunt down. Luke had his own ideas about Phagan and Dewey, but it wasn't his job to point out the increasingly obvious, especially when it was so entertaining to let events play out on their own.

No, he wasn't here because he couldn't deal with their happiness. In a way, their happiness had lifted him with them and had brought him here tonight. In the headlights, the cabin was dark, empty of everything but years of memories, not just of Rosemary, but his dad, killed in the line of duty when Luke was thirteen. This was the first time he'd come here alone since Rosemary's death. She'd loved the mountains, loved this place, especially in a storm—if they were safe inside with a good fire going.

With a start, he realized the cabin had almost disappeared into the storm. Already the warmth from the truck's heater had faded. As

he exhaled, his breath made a white fog in the icy air. Snow flakes, lit by the his headlights, swirled in a wind-driven frenzy. He'd better get moving before he couldn't find his way from here to there. He had no intention of spending the night in his truck. Good thing he'd brought plenty of supplies with him. According to the weather reports, he could be stuck up here for a couple of days. Looked like there'd be enough snow for some cross-country skiing when it cleared. Nothing like a brisk battle with nature to remind you that you were alive.

He left the headlights on while he unlocked the door, though their benefit was limited, and quickly unloaded his supplies. Inside the cabin, he tested the silence and found it comfortable, bearable—though uncomfortably cold. He turned on the refrigerator, wondering how long the power would stay on, while he stowed the perishables. Well, he'd used a snow bank for a fridge before, no reason he couldn't again.

A gust of wind caught the window over the sink, lifting it up, then dropping it with a bang. He caught it before it could lift again, making a mental note to tweak Jake about it when he got home. He and Phoebe had been the last ones to use the cabin. He noticed a bit of snow and some dried stuff on the counter under the window and brushed it into the sink.

The air was chill and slightly damp, tainted with the smell of old fire and older food, but a new fire would soon burn it away. He didn't turn on more lights. He knew his way around and besides, there was enough light spilling out from the kitchen for him to see by until he got the fire going. Rosemary had liked the room lit only by fire. Many a snowy night they'd huddled together under a pile of quilts and watched snow pile up in drifts against the windows.

He stopped for a moment as the memories caught up with him. Rosemary laughing as she pelted him with snowballs. Rosemary smiling up at him from the blanket as the mountain sun bathed her in its crystal light. Rosemary looking at the mountains and not at him when she told him she was going to die and there was nothing either of them could do about it.

Seven years. Like Jacob in the Bible, he'd served his time, done his duty and now it was time to move on. Not to forget, but to move out of the shadows and live again.

"Don't mourn too long, Luke," she'd said to him that last day, her voice the only thing he still recognized about her. She'd never said what too long was, but here and now, he could almost see her standing in the light from the kitchen, tapping her watch the way she always did when he'd been out on the mountain too long.

"I know, Rose," he murmured. "I know. As always, my timing is great. Just great."

He checked the wood box and found it filled to the brim. Jake had also laid out logs in the fireplace. Only needed only a match. That made up for the open window, Luke decided. In a short time, he had the fire going, putting out cheerful heat against the winter chill. When the power went, he'd be warm and have hot coffee. He could live without a lot of things, but hot coffee in the morning wasn't one of them.

He'd sleep in front of the fire. It would be warmer and he could more easily feed the hungry fire. He and Rosemary had slept downstairs the last time they were here. They'd made a bed for two on the floor in front of the fire. He'd use the couch. Wouldn't be the first time he'd done time on one. Life with Rosemary hadn't been all smooth sailing. The Kirby men had made a habit of marrying spirited women.

He did a quick run upstairs for a couple more quilts. There was always a sturdy mega-sized lap quilt folded over the back of the couch, but it wasn't enough on a night like this. He also grabbed a couple of pillows to soften the hard arms on each end. As he came down, he noticed that the quilt wasn't folded over the back, but spread across the seat. In the flickering light from the fire, it almost looked like there was someone under it. For a minute chills snaked down his back, until common sense reasserted itself.

If someone was here, it was a squatter who'd likely used the unlatched window to get in. Damn, couldn't kick a dog out on a night like this. So much for being alone. He dumped his blanket load on a chair. Odd that whoever it was hadn't heard his noisy arrival and made their presence known. It was enough to make him uneasy, so he pulled his gun. As a cop, he'd learned to err on the side of caution early in his career. He knew which boards creaked and took care to avoid them as he quietly approached the couch. Keeping the figure covered, he reached out and flipped the edge of the blanket back and saw....

Feet.

Or more precisely, a pair of hiking boots and blue-jean covered legs below the knees. Good boots. Not a squatter then. Maybe a hiker?

Luke, feeling a bit ridiculous and a little anxious about the lack of movement, moved to the other end. Being alone with a body wasn't what he had in mind either. This time when he flipped the blanket back, he saw hair. Lots of it. Tangled and blonde enough to make Marilyn Monroe jealous. Long, too. The ends of most of it were hidden under the part of the blanket that still covered her middle, except for a bunch that hung over her face and off the edge of the couch, forming a question mark on the wood floor.

It seemed Goldilocks had come calling but found only one bear.

He stowed his gun and knelt down beside her. Bits of dried brush, brown grass and twigs were caught in the tousled strands of her hair. She had a thick, fleece jacket on, with bits of dried stuff stuck to it, too. He noticed it had been torn in several places. One of her arms also hung off the edge of the couch, the hand at the end of the arm was bare and badly scratched. A couple of her nails were broken, the edges ragged and torn.

"Who's sleeping on my couch?" he muttered, as he gathered up the trailing strands of hair, icy cold and soft as silk, to expose her face. It was scratched, too, and there was a nasty looking bump just above her temple. A thin trail of dried blood disappeared into her hair line. The bones under the scratches were good, the kind that wear well over time. Her jaw was strong and determined. Laugh lines at the corners of her mouth and eyes seemed at odds with a mouth that was full and rather sad. Her thick lashes lay in dark fans against her pale, bruised skin, hiding her eyes. Equally dark brows arched over them.

It was hard to be sure because memory was so unreliable, and his memories of Rosemary as a young woman were buried under her last months of wasting slowly away from ovarian cancer, but she also reminded him of a young Rosemary, or her sister, if Rosemary had had one. It was a bit eerie on a dark and stormy night. If her eyes were blue when she opened them, he might just have to join the X-Files fan club.

Luke felt along her neck. Her skin was unnervingly cold, but he found a pulse—rapid and a bit shallow—but there. She wasn't dead. Yet.

Luke knew a bit of first aid—luckily most of it about hypothermia, since he and his brothers spent so much time in the mountains. He needed to get her warmed up fast. He grabbed the quilts he'd collected and piled them on top of her. When he sat down to try and ease a pillow under her head, he realized she was looking at him, her eyes wide and puzzled.

Violet. He hadn't expected that. Deep, pure violet. They brought the pale mask of her face to instant, vivid life and put a good bit of his unease to rest. Not Rosemary. Not that he really believed she was. It was just weird. Weird enough for his imagination to get a little away from him. Thank goodness neither of his brothers were here. Wouldn't they get some mileage out of this situation if they ever found out?

He'd put her in her late twenties, but now, looking into her eyes, he upped that by a few years. Her eyes were wise and knowing, more aware than the average twenty-something, despite the confusion clouding their depths.

"Do I—know you?" she asked. Her voice was a thin thread of sound, but clear and crisp. It suited their mountainous surroundings. Reminded him of a stream running over rocks on its way to the low lands.

"I don't think so. Name's Luke Kirby. My family owns this cabin."

Her lashes closed for a moment. Her brows drew together in a frown. "Cabin?"

He reached past her, turned on a rustic styled lamp and gestured to their surroundings. "Cabin."

Her lashes lifted, her eyes surveying what she could without moving. "Oh."

Despite this, he could tell the lights were still out inside her head. He waited quietly for her to orient herself. Something had happened. A fall of some kind, he guessed, based on what he's seen of

her injuries. It sometimes took time to put the pieces of memory together in the right order after a shock.

"Would you like some soup and coffee?" he asked. "We need to get you warmed up, if you're up to it."

"I am hungry." She sounded surprised. "Thank you."

He left her for the kitchen, glad for the time away from her to get his thoughts in order. He still felt a bit off balance by her resemblance to Rosemary, and, if he were strictly honest with himself, her unexpected beauty. His body had taken in more input than his brain could process, but the main gist of it was basically, *wow*.

He put water in the coffee pot, started heat under it. Found a can of soup and dumped it in a pan. Maybe he should start dating again, just to let off some steam in his "wow" reflex.

He turned and found her standing in the doorway studying him with a seriousness that did nothing to relieve the pressure. She was taller than he'd expected from someone with so slight a build. She stood carefully, but with a grace and elegance that her obvious discomfort couldn't erase.

"Is there—" she stopped, color flooding her cheeks.

Luke found he could grin and immediately felt better, more balanced and in control again. "Bathroom's through there. Light's on the right."

It was odd, but kind of cute. Usually only old ladies were embarrassed to ask for the john these days. There was something kind of old fashioned about her, despite her very modern clothes. He could see her presiding over a tea pot in a room full of antiques. In a dress that matched her eyes and had a bunch of white at the neck. Something like Katherine Hepburn would wear.

"Thank you." She turned, wobbling slightly.

He fought back an sudden urge to leap to her assistance. Partly because he didn't want to scare her and partly because he wasn't sure he could leap. His body had surprised him a few times lately, by not responding to his mental commands. A reminder that he wasn't as young as he felt. Instead he asked, "Do you need help?"

She smiled slightly. "Thank you, but no. I can manage. I guess I stiffened up or something while I was asleep."

Her back straightened, her chin lifting as she made a determined bee line for the bathroom door. She had guts to go with the beauty.

It wasn't until Luke heard the door creak closed that he realized he still didn't know her name. While he kept a watchful eye on the soup, he dug out the first aid kit and a flashlight. If she had a concussion, her eyes would show it. And if she was? Well, he'd deal with it then. He had his phone. He could call for advice.

The soup started to bubble. He lifted it off the heat, gave it a stir, then poured it in a bowl. Grabbed some crackers and a cup of coffee and put it all on a tray. He heard the door creak open and found his thoughts bubbling like the soup. It was, he decided ruefully, like something out of a Raymond Chandler book. Snowed in the mountains with a mysterious woman—who had probably missed her step, taken a tumble and then lost her way, he reminded himself. No mystery, just Mother Nature's pointed reminder not to take her for granted.

She hadn't just used the toilet, he saw. She'd also washed the blood off her face and tidied her hair. Most of the bits of brush were gone and her hair was now pulled back into a sort of knotted pony tail that hung down to her butt. She was also white as a sheet from the effort. Luke jumped forward, surprised and pleased his body did as requested, and helped her back to the couch. He got her settled with a pillow behind her and blankets tucked around, then brought her the tray.

"Can you manage yourself?" he asked.

She nodded, a slight, grateful smile briefly flickering across her face. She picked up the spoon using, Luke noted, her left hand. When it became apparent she wasn't a south paw, he folded back the blankets and found her right wrist swelled to twice its normal size. He probed it gently and heard her gasp.

"Sorry. Can you move your fingers?" She flexed them. "How about your wrist?"

She managed to bend at the wrist, but the effort drained more color out of her face.

"I don't think it's broken, but it should probably be strapped up until it can be x-rayed. A hairline fracture and a sprain can both cause swelling." He should know. He'd had both. He opened the first aid kit and rummaged through it until he'd found everything he needed.

"Are you a doctor?" A few bites of the soup put a slight flush in her cheeks.

"Actually, I'm a cop. And an all-too-frequent patient." He grinned at her. "My mom claims most of her gray hairs are my fault, but my brothers did their fair share, believe me. Most of it from rock climbing." While he talked, he helped her out of her jacket, an obviously painful exercise, then applied a wrist splint and wrapped it expertly with elastic bandage. When he was done, he touched the tips of her fingers. "Can you feel this?"

She nodded, relaxing back against the couch with a sigh of relief. "It feels a lot better."

"Let me know if the tips of your fingers start to tingle and I'll loosen it." He frowned. "Normally I'd apply ice, but you're still pretty chilled."

"I feel wonderfully warm, but I'd rather avoid ice for now."

She ate most of her soup and but only took one sip of the coffee, using her free hand. She stared into the cup, then looked at him. "I don't think I drink coffee."

She looked startled. It did seem like something she should know about herself.

"I'll get you some water, but first—" Luke set the tray aside, and picked up the flashlight.

"What now?" She sounded amused.

"Looks like you took a pretty nasty tumble, could have a mild concussion. I want to look at your pupils." He tipped her head up and briefly flashed the light in her eyes, watching her pupils react. "Did you lose consciousness?"

She had to smile at the question. She seemed to have lost more than consciousness. "Oh yeah."

"It's not unusual for the noggin to be scrambled after a fall."

He moved next to her, his big, warm hands cupping either side of her face. His face was close enough for her to see the texture of his skin as he gently probed her scalp for injuries. The words craggy and weather-beaten came to mind first. He looked like a man who lived much of his life outside. He wasn't exactly handsome, but she felt an odd, surprising flicker of attraction flare where he touched her.

"Besides the bump on your temple, there's another here, above your ear."

"I've got one on the lower occipital, too," she said, touching the base of her head with a wince. He looked surprised as he checked it out.

"That you do. You obviously did a top over tail today." He sat back, his hands dropping away.

To her annoyance, her skin felt cold, almost bereft without his touch. You know nothing about this man, she reminded herself. But that wasn't the worst part. She knew nothing, literally nothing, about herself, except, apparently, that she had an occipital. And a parietal, frontal and temporal. Very weird. Except for that, it was as if she'd come into being when she opened her eyes a short time ago. She hadn't even known what she looked like until she saw herself in the mirror. It was an odd feeling to meet yourself for the first time. By most standards, even with the bumps and bruises, the face that had stared back at her would be considered beautiful. She'd felt no pride of ownership, no sense of *I am a beautiful woman*. No sense of herself at all. She'd fingered her clothes. They were made of good fabric, but sturdy and serviceable, rather than glamorous. No perfume, cheap or expensive lingered on her skin. She'd sniffed again. Soap. Just soap. And the smell of pine. Judging by the amount of pine needles she'd shaken out of her hair, the smell of pine was inevitable, rather than revealing.

Her hands, beneath the scratches, were well cared for. Her fingers were long and well shaped. The nails that weren't torn were neatly filed but unpolished. To her surprise, despite the signs she'd taken a very nasty tumble, she had this slight, very slight, feeling of

relief. It was as if she'd laid down a burden. Beneath the uncertainty, she felt light and free. If she had no past, that left only a future full of possibilities.

"What do you remember?" he asked.

A better question would be, what are you trying to forget, she thought. She shrugged, then wished she hadn't. The movement upped the pain quota enough to make stars dance across her view.

"Let's start with something easy, like your name?"

Her name. Everyone had a name. For a moment, she had an impulse to make something up. Put something onto the blank canvas of her mind, but her mind refused to play. It didn't cough up a single consonant, let alone a whole name. She pushed at the gray mist and it pushed back. Opening just enough to let out a single emotion. Panic. It spilled through her like a tsunami, threatening to sweep her away. As if he sensed it, he grabbed her good hand, held it strongly, a life line pulling her free of the dark undertow.



Excerpt from *Lonesome Mama*:

Chapter One

IT WAS A LOVELY day for a barbeque, Debra Kirby decided as she sat on the swaying wood swing in her back yard. It was warm and dry, with a slight breeze to keep things from edging over into hot. Sharp and unexpected regret bit deep into her heart. How John would have loved being with his boys in the huddle around the grill. He'd have looked her direction with a proud-papa grin then gleefully stirred the pot just a bit so he could see his boys strut their stuff.

No question the easiest pot to stir was middle son, Matt. The pugnacious set of his jaw made an odd counterpoint to his gentle rocking of Mark, perched on Matt's shoulders, pounding his father's head with his baby hands. John would have loved being a grandpa and watching Matt getting some of what he'd dished out as a child. Debra got a kick out of seeing her tough-minded son wrapped around a tiny, chubby, and rather grubby, little finger.

Three years of marriage agreed with Matt. He was a man at peace--except with his baby brother, Jake, who held both fork and tongs and so had all power over the state of the sizzling meat. Debra shook her head ruefully as her oldest and youngest bristled at each other over the doneness, or lack thereof, of their lunch. Some habits were hard to break, even with the softening influence Dani brought to Matt's side of the equation.

Luke, like Switzerland, stood between the younger siblings, still trying to negotiate peace. As dark-visaged as Matt, but slightly taller and much grayer, he'd always looked cheerful on the surface, but now the joy went all the way through. Gone were the dark days following Rosemary's death and the deep sorrow hidden by surface cheer. A year of marriage to Amelia had been good for her first-born.

That left only Jake's situation to ponder. Lighter and leaner than his older brothers, he was the only one of her sons that looked like her, though in a decidedly masculine way. She'd smiled and hid her worry when Jake married a convicted thief two years ago. Her restraint had been amply rewarded. Jake and his Phoebe were a perfect match, even if she would be on probation for another million hours or so--a fate shared by the fourth man at the grill.

With them, but not of them, Dewey Hyatt was tolerated by the Kirby boys because Phoebe considered him a brother and they liked his wife, Bryn. Bryn was in the kitchen with the Kirby wives, probably still wondering how she'd happened to fall in love with the mischievous, high-tech thief. Domesticity sat uneasily on the FBI Special Agent, but she had a compelling reason to hang with the Kirby wives--the same one that had driven Debra Kirby outside to the swing and her musings.

With four very pregnant women in one room, there was only one topic of conversation. Not that Debra hadn't tried to change the subject, but like lemmings, they returned to what, Debra conceded, was a subject dear to all their pumping-for-two hearts.

Four babies and all due in the same, upcoming month. They couldn't have planned it that way if they'd tried. Debra had been grand-childless for many long years. She'd delighted at each month of Dani's pregnancy, even when Dani lost her delight and only wanted relief. She'd been outside when Matt brought her the news of Mark's birth. She'd cried when she held Mark for the first time--and wished for John with a fresh, sharp ache. Now she felt overwhelmed and acutely aware that she was very much alone in the companionship stakes.

She'd hoped that sticking a toe back into the dating world with John's best friend, Henry Maxwell, would ease the odd ache that had developed around her heart after two decades of peaceful acceptance, but all it had done was make her miss John even more. Henry was a nice man, but he was almost too much like John, without managing to be enough like John to suit. It didn't make a whole lot of sense, but the heart rarely did. Henry had proposed the other night, but she couldn't see herself marrying a pale shadow of John just because she was lonely. It wouldn't satisfy her or him.

There was a stir at her back door and her three daughters-in-law and Bryn waddled out bearing condiments and accompaniments to the meat Jake was pulling off the grill. The women were followed by Amelia's father, Donovan Kincaid, with his bimbo du jour hanging on his arm. Debra bit back a grin as she watched her boys puff up like offended blow fish at the sight of the young thing tripping across the lawn in highly spiked heels and very few clothes.

"Daddy's here," Amelia said brightly and with an air of still enjoying the sound of the words in her ears. Blonde, beautiful, infinitely serene, and amazingly pregnant, she had a hint of mischief in her violet eyes and around the edges of her lush mouth. Clearly she'd anticipated the effect the bimbo would have on the brothers Kirby and was prepared to enjoy the moment to its fullest.

Debra narrowed her gaze against the high, bright sun as she studied her newest guest. This one might be the youngest yet. As if to echo that thought, Matt made some comment about asking to see her ID that the wind chimes only partially obscured. Even Luke had trouble staying Switzerland. It was a little harder to remain neutral where his father-in-law was concerned. Debra set her grin free. There was no question that Donovan brought a rakish quality to the proceedings that was highly entertaining.

If the boys wouldn't rise to the bait so beautifully, Donovan would probably quit riling them--though possibly not. Donovan used his bimbo parade as a shield of sorts, but Debra didn't have a clue what he was afraid they would see in him or about him.

The former mercenary turned security specialist appeared both delighted and terrified by his new role as father and soon-to-be grandfather. She understood those feelings, despite the huge disparities in their life experiences. She knew how roles and appearances could obscure what went on inside. She knew that age

was a physical, not mental, thing. Sometimes her brain would forget and send a signal to her legs to jump up, and then be surprised when she couldn't. It was odd to feel so out of synch with her self, to look in the mirror and see a faded, unfamiliar version of herself. The gray hair and marked-by-life face didn't reflect her innate belief that her life was still full of possibilities.

Donovan somehow managed to shift his bimbo off into the circle of young people and started in her direction. Debra was glad to put her odd thoughts aside. She liked Donovan and enjoyed spending time with someone closer to her age who wasn't taking HRT.

The sun was behind him, so she couldn't see his expression, but he walked confidently and with a hint of provocation in his easy stride. A bit of a smile tugged at the edges of his mouth. It reminded her of John, just after he'd stirred the pot.

It wasn't the first time Donovan reminded her of John, but unlike Henry, he was no one's pale shadow. Despite the wear and tear of battle, he was a good-looking man and Debra wasn't so old that she didn't enjoy the view. She'd always liked tall men, though he was whipcord lean, a stark contrast to John's stocky build. He walked with the innate confidence of someone who knew he could seriously kick ass. His brown hair might have more gray in it than when she'd first met him--most of it probably acquired during the short period Amelia had gone missing last year--but it was distinguished gray and touched with a hint of silver.

He was learning that fatherhood took a toll, no matter how late in life one came to the role. Amelia was so clearly elated with her new "daddy" that Luke kept his opinions about daddy-dearest to himself--at least he thought he did. Amelia didn't miss much. Luckily for both men, she had a good sense of humor and a personality that spread gentle oil on troubled waters.

Debra didn't play favorites with her daughters-in-law, but Amelia was a much more relaxing companion than, say, the very turbulent, deliberately sexy Phoebe. Even pregnant, Phoebe had a lushness about her that drew her husband's eyes like a magnet. She'd lost the chip on her shoulder early in the marriage, but she wasn't above pulling the chains her brothers-in-law were wont to let dangle so temptingly in her face, particularly now when she was hopped up on hormones.

"May I?" Donovan asked Debra, indicating the empty space next to her.

Debra looked up, shading her eyes from the sun. Despite the "daddy" tag, he retained his air of rakish mystery and his crisp, military bearing. His face was roughly sculpted by nature and beat up some by life, but still managed to be charming. His twinkling gaze invited her to join him in his tweaking of her boys.

Debra smiled a welcome and shifted to give him more room. The bench gave as it took the added weight. Up close, he smelled good. She inhaled deeply, pulling in his scent and that of her yard and the cooking food. Almost imperceptibly, she relaxed inside. She felt different when he showed up. Even an old broad like her felt a bit sexy and almost dangerous.

With the sun at a different angle, she met his watchful, gray gaze and found it, as always, surface friendly, but carefully shuttered against deep penetration. If he ever opened his gaze, what would it reveal? Amelia was probably the only person he allowed in and Debra had a feeling he even put limits on what she could see.

He relaxed back into the cushions with a sigh of relief, his sardonic gaze on the scene by the table. "For such bright boys..." He didn't finish the sentence, just shook his head and slanted her a look that was almost boyish in its mischief.

"You could just stop tweaking them," Debra pointed out.

"I could," he admitted. His date tossed her platinum blonde hair and almost tossed her breasts out of her skimpy top. "But it wouldn't be as much fun."

The expectant women looked amused, despite the bimbo's emaciation, so Debra didn't feel a need to intervene. The boys could take care of themselves, as they pointed out with annoying regularity.

"I suppose not." Debra turned to smile at him and caught him studying her, not his date, with a look in his gray eyes that was oddly unsettling.

"Amelia says you wanted to go to Phoenix next weekend?" Unlike his eyes, Donovan's voice was drowsy and relaxed.

Debra arched her brows. "I have a friend there who is remarrying, but the flights were all booked up. I took too long to decide to go."

"I'm flying there to do some business next Thursday. You're welcome to ride along. I've even got the company suite at my disposal. Two rooms," he added, as if she might think he was making her an improper suggestion.

"That's very kind, but I'd need to stay at least through Sunday night," Debra said, feeling practicality trying to stamp out hope. She longed to see her friend, who saw her as a real person, not just a role, but she'd been worried about leaving so close to her daughters-in-law delivery dates. Theresa always managed to cheer her up. It was one of those friendships that endured separation and picked up as if there'd been none. And she'd love to meet the man who lured Theresa out of her determinedly single state.

"Not a problem. I'm sure there's plenty of tourist crap for me to see. I hear they have cactus."

He grinned as he stretched out his long, lean legs and hooked his hands behind his head. He had cowboy boots on his feet, but they didn't look out of place. They were a part of who he was. His jeans looked worn and comfortable. His soft blue tee shirt added that tint to the gray of his eyes, stealing some of the cool from their depths. He wore his brown hair slightly longer than her boys and she wondered if it was soft or crisp in texture.

Whoa. She gave herself an internal shake to refocused her thoughts in a less dangerous direction. She managed to chuckle. "Well, if that gets old, I am allowed to bring a guest." Her gaze swept his sinewy length. "You'd cause quite a stir, I expect. Plenty of entertainment value."

And he wouldn't look too shabby on her arm, she had to admit, trying not to hope he'd agree. Pride was something she should be trying to stamp out, not blatantly encourage, even if it would be fun. There was one guest she wouldn't mind one-upping. She, Theresa, and Diane had all been young mothers together. Theresa's husband had left her for another woman. Diane had left her husband for a younger man. Debra didn't know why Diane had stayed in touch with her or Theresa, except for the one-upmanship factor. When Theresa had called to invite her, she'd mentioned Diane would be there, with a sigh and the caveat to "wait until you see the new husband." Donovan would be a wonderful antidote to Diane's feigned pity.

The antidote chuckled, the sound oddly infectious. "How could I resist that offer? I'll throw a suit in my suitcase."

He almost sounded pleased, but that was silly. And if she were inclined to lose her perspective, she only had to look at the bimbo looking in such horror at the plate of meat. Did he know she was a vegetarian before he brought her? She looked at Donovan who looked both resigned and amused.

There was warmth and charm in his eyes that she hadn't seen before. It spoke to the young girl hiding inside her old broad body. Before she could stop them, her toes curled into the grass. Luckily it hadn't been cut yet this week, keeping her toes out of sight. She drew a shaky breath and managed to get out a strangled thank you.

"I'll pick you up early Thursday then?"

"Sure." She'd have to get a new dress. The one she'd been planning to wear was frump city. For a moment she felt fear, but before she could act on it, she realized that the hollow feeling was gone. It might not last. Hollow would likely return. She knew Donovan wasn't interested in her, but that didn't mean she couldn't enjoy her small adventure. She lifted her chin and let her young smile out of the barn. It had been there far too long and should have been lame, but it didn't feel lame at all. It felt good. If it seemed that his eyes warmed even more, well, she'd always had a good imagination.

A rising babble of talk and activity across the lawn broke into their moment. Donovan sighed. "Looks like they're ready to eat. Once more into the fray?that is one hormone intense zone."

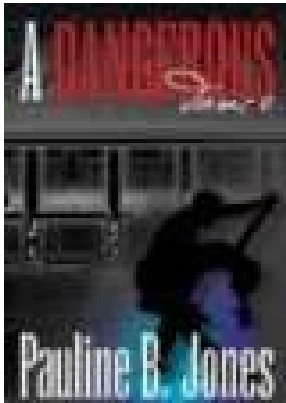
He got up and held out a hand for her. Debra took it, liking the way it felt to have a man's strong fingers close around hers, even if were just a moment. Once upright, she leaned close to him and admitted in a low voice, "I'm so sick of pregnant talk."

"I thought it was just me."

As they drew close to the table, Debra heard Donovan's bimbo say, "My mom says when she had me that her labor lasted three days."

Debra choked and looked at Donovan. He gave her a wide-eyed look, with humor lurking beneath the horror in their depths. Apparently he didn't know pregnancy talk was infectious, even to bimbos.

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Review of *A Dangerous Dance*:

"I really enjoyed *A Dangerous Dance*...I found myself drawn into these complicated figures, who all seem to have an ulterior motive...I found the characters to be similar to a chess game, where you draw your opponent into a checkmate. This is a very interesting book that will keep you intrigued to the very end." *Romance Reviews Today*

Excerpt of *A Dangerous Dance*

Chapter One

Remy Mistral was watching for the opening and still he almost missed it. Out of the corner of his eye he caught the impression of a break in the dense foliage on his left and hit the brakes. There was no one behind—and hadn't been for the past half hour of driving—so he backed the sleek gray Mercedes, and then turned into the even narrower side road with a swaying lurch as his car's suspension tried to adjust to the sudden downgrade in conditions. Two car lengths along, he found his way barred by a vine-covered gate.

A push of a button silently lowered the tinted window. He rested his arm on the frame as warm, thick air rolled in carrying the pungent scent of growing things. With one finger he pushed his sunglasses down, the better to pierce the green and yellow shadows and vines that prevented him from finding a pattern in the ornate gate's grill work.

Remy shifted to neutral and pushed open the door, letting more humid air rush in and over power his car's air conditioning. He slid out and stretched—it had been a long ride from New Orleans—then slipped off the jacket of his gray Armani suit and draped it carefully over the seat back. Only then did he approach the gate.

A thick layer of vines clung to the gate, and on either side, and a fence marched into shadow in an unyielding line. Remy tugged at the vines at the center of the gate, until he could see the pale, yellow gleam that marked the road through a line of oak and cypress trees dripping with the gray ghosts of Spanish moss. A few more tugs and he found and traced the letters scrolled into metal.

Oz.

The estate had been named to remind Magus Merlinn of the years he spent in Australia, and perhaps the Wizard designation had grown from that. It certainly wasn't because Magus had Klan associations. It wasn't even clear if he'd been given the title or taken it. What was certain, he'd been a wizard at creating success out of nothing. Ten years ago, he'd turned his attention to the governor's mansion, with a run for the White House to follow, but a bullet had stopped the legend. Yesterday, a homemade knife in a prison yard had stopped the Wizard's killer.

Was it a coincidence that rumors of a revival in Oz had started sometime before yesterday, though no one could quite say when or where they started? All Remy knew for sure was that in the good old boy taverns of power, rumors about Dorothy's return bearing the Wizard's standard had started to circulate as the first candidates hopeful of replacing the sitting governor started testing the waters. What no one seemed to know was who she intended bestowing that standard on—or if she planned to carry it herself.

Remy rarely did a straight news story anymore, but politics were king on his talk radio show and a scoop on Dorothy's plans wouldn't hurt his ratings any—or at least, that's what he'd told himself during the drive to Oz. The crazy plan he kept pushed to the back of his head as he looked at the firmly barred gate. It looked like it hadn't moved since the Wizard last passed through it in a fancy wooden box. Remy had to wonder about the reliability of his source.

He gave the gate a shake, then stepped back. Was it locked or rusted shut? He had some WD-40 in his trunk, if rust were the problem. He checked the closure, but found no chains or padlocks holding it in place and, despite the wads of plant crap on the gate itself, there was adequate clearance between gate and ground.

"Damn." He shook it again, but couldn't tell what was the obstruction was. Unless a tornado miraculously appeared and lifted him over it, Oz was going to be tougher to crack than he expected—if Dorothy was even there—

Before he could finish the thought, a shrill shriek broke the silence as the gate pulled from his hold and began to ponderously swing open, exposing the road. Weed-choked and broken in spots, but still clearly yellow, and clearly brick, leading to the heart of Magus Merlinn's lost Oz.

"I'll be damned." With a last, wary look around, Remy slid behind the wheel of his car, engaged the gears and pulled through. Behind him, the gate closed with an ominous clang.

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